

Gorbachev tells Lithuania to stop formation of militia

By Mark Nicholson in Moscow and Peter Riddell in Washington

MR MIKHAIL Gorbachev, the Soviet President, yesterday demanded that the leaders of the rebellious Lithuanian republic take urgent action to stop the formation of volunteer civil defence units and gave them two days to comply with his order.

The latest development in Lithuania's uneasy showdown with Moscow over its efforts to win independence follows an order issued by the Kremlin on Wednesday that Lithuanians surrender all personal weapons.

The Baltic republic launched moves to recruit volunteers to

defend Lithuanian territory after declaring its independence from the Soviet Union on March 11.

But in a telegram to the Lithuanian President, Mr Vytautas Landsbergis, Mr Gorbachev said: "I suggest that undelayed measures be taken to stop all actions at creating these and similar units."

"Please report fulfilment within two days," added the text released by the official news agency Tass.

KGB security troops also reinforced border posts along the international frontiers, the agency reported. It said the

troops were assisting customs officials in fulfilling Wednesday's decree.

Leaders of Lithuania's parliament rejected as an illegitimate breach of sovereignty Mr Gorbachev's tough measures calling for all weapons to be handed over and a similar response could be expected on the issue of defence units.

Mr Gorbachev yesterday sent a team of 11 prosecutors to the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, to enforce the crackdown on the threatened widescale violation of Soviet laws.

The prosecutors called for strict observance of Soviet law

in the republic and claimed that Lithuanian residents had complained of "insulting" behaviour towards the Soviet army and institutions.

Mrs Kazimiera Pruskiene, Lithuania's prime minister, sent a message to the Soviet leader describing the weapons decree and a tightening of border and immigration controls as interference in the affairs of a sovereign state. She called for talks with Mr Gorbachev.

In Washington President George Bush said he was convinced the answer was "peaceful discussion between the parties. It is very important that

force not be used, but I believe that they can talk and work out these problems."

He took a markedly conciliatory approach towards the latest warnings by Moscow to Lithuania, declining to express any criticism of President Gorbachev or to speculate on what might happen if force was used.

"We do not recognise the incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union. However, there are certain realities in life. Lithuanians are well aware of them and they should talk, as they are, to the Soviet officials about these differ-

ences," he said.

In Moscow, Mr Gennady Gerasimov, the Soviet spokesman, justified the measures as "pre-emptive steps in a situation characterised by tension."

However, he said Moscow ruled out using force in the republic.

The head of Lithuania's civil defence agency, General Ginutis Taurinskas, conceded to an angry session of the parliament that he had begun to comply with an order from Moscow to hand over weapons and vehicles in his command.

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"It is my view that I should obey the laws passed by the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet," he told deputies. "But there are also laws of the Soviet Union I should obey."

It was not clear last night whether Gen Ginutis would hand over the remainder of the guns and vehicles. Nor was it clear whether citizens would comply with the decree and hand over an estimated 30,000 hunting shotguns registered in the republic.

But in a further sign of Lithuanian resistance to Moscow, Sajudis, the nationalist movement, claimed yesterday that 1,500 Lithuanians serving in the Red Army had left their units and returned to the republic.

Mr Algimantas Cekuolis, a Sajudis leader, said last night that Lithuania would resist Moscow only through civil disobedience. "There has been no shot fired in our move to independence, and none will be."